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Department of Corrections
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Before the Appropriations Committee

Good Evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Committee, my name is Ellen Durko and I am a Registered Nurse at the Department of Corrections. As a Health Care employee in CT Corrections, I have some insights on the mental health crisis in the State of Connecticut. I'm here today to ask you to allocate \$20 million to DOC Healthcare to address systemic understaffing of inmate medical services, expand access, and improve the quality of healthcare and mental healthcare services for the incarcerated. You can do this in several ways:

- Increase the number of licensed mental health staff to reduce patient ratios and improve quality and increase access to mental health services.
- Require all mental health staff be certified in trauma-based treatments.
- Expand therapy services for the inmate population, including music, art, and trauma based therapy

What people fail to understand is a large part of the work is being done by the Department of Corrections. When “deinstitutionalization” occurred in the eighties Corrections nationwide became the “de-facto” inpatient psychiatric and also inpatient addictions treatment centers. Recently, Covid and the opioid crisis swelled the mental health population in DOC, and yet, we were ignored when the State received funds from the Sackler family lawsuit and the American Rescue Plan.

The majority of incarcerated individuals have experienced severe childhood traumas, abuses, neglect and/or suffer from untreated mental health illnesses. Worse yet are the obituaries found in every zip code (nationwide) of those people “gone too soon.” Addiction is now the reason this generation will not outlive their parents and grandparents. There is no medication to fix trauma, it requires intensive therapy. The current staffing levels of mental health clinicians barely have time for crisis intervention, let alone trauma therapy. A State Sentencing Commission report, due to be released in March shows that approximately eighty percent of CT Inmates have a mental health or substance abuse issue requiring treatment. This is no surprise to many people. Our goal here in Corrections is to stop the revolving door of admissions to DOC, set people up for success thereby empowering people to realize their fullest potential and contribute to society. The six billion dollar surplus in the State coffers will be well spent on hiring more clinicians and providing mental health care in Corrections, and in the communities that our patients return to, which is a win-win for all of us. Thank you for your time.